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SUBJECT: BREAKING FAST WITH FRIENDS IN SANAA

¶1. SUMMARY: Early in the month, Ambassador hosted an iftar for 120 key contacts and expressed his appreciation of Ramadan as a month of introspection. During the month, the Public Affairs section and a local non-governmental organization co-sponsored several iftars for a marginalized group of Yemenis known as the "servants" or "akhdam." Pol/Econ officers also held late-night social sessions attended by members of political parties, the business community and NGOs. The object of these meetings and sponsored events was to demonstrate respect for Islam and to expand Embassy outreach efforts during the most important month of the Islamic calendar. End Summary.

¶2. AMBASSADOR HOSTSIFTAR: On October 10, the Embassy began Ramadan with a representational iftar for contacts. Over 120 key counterparts of the consular, public diplomacy, political-economic, political-military, and management sections broke their fast with Embassy staff. The event included the traditional prayer, a buffet, a subtitled slide show illustrating Muslim life in America, and remarks by Ambassador focusing on the importance of personal growth during the traditional Islamic month of spiritual renewal. The Iftar demonstrated to ROYG officials USG respect for Islam; one official remarked that he was pleasantly surprised to see the Embassy offer a place suitable for the traditional pre-meal prayer.

¶3. The evening event helped solidify contacts in Yemeni agencies working on some key mission priorities including: border security, immigration, and public outreach. In particular, post was able to cultivate its relationship with the deputy head of the Yemeni Attorneys' Union, President Saleh's personal translator, and the prison warden holding half the American prisoners in Yemen. Public Affairs also supplied a business card-sized handout featuring the Embassy website and several IIP-websites featuring Arabic language articles about various USG policy issues. Media contacts were delighted to receive the handy reference tool.

¶4. MEDIA REACTION TO AMBASSADOR'SIFTAR: While participants were very complimentary of our initiative, press reaction was typically mixed. One independent weekly, Al Adhwa'a, published a straightforward report about the Ambassador's iftar, another independent weekly, Al Rai Al Aam, reported that attendees were "friends" of the United States and opined that Ambassador uses such occasions to "interfere in Yemen's internal affairs." The ROYG armed forces weekly paper, 26 September, reported the Ambassador addressed invitees in Arabic "for fear of being misquoted or misinterpreted;" moreover, the paper obliquely criticized those journalists "who had had side discussions" with the Ambassador after "praising U.S. democratic models in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq."

¶5. THREEIFTARS COSPONSORED BY PUBLIC AFFAIRS: The NGO Al Sada Association, which works to empower women and children of the marginalized minority known as "akhdams," who live in shantytowns around Sana'a, agreed to co-sponsor three iftars for their clients. The first of these, on October 19, found 65 children eating together at the NGO headquarters, which is located in the modest neighborhood near the city's slaughterhouse. Most present were under ten years of age and some had walked for hours to be present. Many were orphans and the older children helped the younger ones to ensure that all who were present had plenty to eat. On October 23, the association cosponsored a second iftar for 65 women and children. These gathered in the three rooms of the NGO headquarters and shared food in the traditional family-style manner, in which people sit on the floor and share from common dishes. All present were clearly delighted and the atmosphere, festive.

¶6. A third dinner for over 60 was offered by the NGO to the men of the "akhdam" community two days later. The

association also distributed book bags, containing various Arabic-language materials, including magazines and children's books, supplied by Public Affairs to the families of these youngsters. As the month draws to a close, Yemenis buy new clothes for members of their families and the NGO offers their client families an annual distribution of canned goods and food supplies. This year, the NGO will also distribute a modest sum of money to each family, using cash donations collected by the U.S. Embassy community. Several emboffs, including Muslim Americans, attended the Iftars and were moved by the simplicity of the meal, the pleasant atmosphere, and the thanks they were offered at the NGO headquarters.

¶7. Emboffs held several social events after the evening iftar meal to introduce the newly arrived Political/Economic section chief. These sessions were attended by working-level contacts of Yemen's major political parties, media representatives, members of the business community, and NGO leaders. On one of these occasions, DCM led an informal discussion on the progress of democratic reform and press freedom in Yemen (reftel).

¶8. COMMENT: The month of Ramadan is one that finds most Yemenis focused on family and home, but Embassy found Yemenis quite responsive to and appreciative of our efforts to reach out to a wide range of contacts at all levels of society. Our goal of demonstrating our appreciation for the traditions shared by Muslims during the month of Ramadan were, overall, successful. End comment.

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